

*It was the first and the last time that I walked at the head of the clan's procession. The rope was ready around my neck. I had on a white shift the women had made especially. Mam's bangle sparkled on my wrist. Hidden in my hand was Rur's knot of hair.*

*Rur walked behind me, with my family. I could hear Mam's moans. I could hear the footsteps of the townspeople. In Inchquinoag forest I could hear every last leaf, trembling.*

*Padum, padum, padum, went my heart. It would surely explode and kill me before they did. Padum, padum, it said. I live. I work. I pump. This cannot be. I've a lifetime of beating still to do.*

*As we came to the place where the view opens up to the head of the lough, they let me stop. My home stretched before me in the dawn shadow. The hills cascaded downwards, embracing their descent. A skylark rose up, brown and small. It climbed its invisible staircase, crooning.*

*Death is not a reaper, like they say, nor even a friend. It is dark, fierce water, an inundation.*

*The person holding the rope gave the line between my neck and his hand a flick. I walked up the final stretch of*

*hill. We came to the ordained place. A gallows, hardly higher than myself, had been erected. A block of wood was placed beneath in readiness.*

*'Do you want a blindfold?' the executioner asked.*

*'No,' I replied.*

*The prayer was said, the old prayer. Forgive us for what we have done, and for what we have failed to do. Brennor's voice was loudest. I stepped up onto the block and turned towards them.*

*The faces were cruel, solemn, pitying, triumphant, sad, anguished. Brennor's face and Rur's face were side by side. One was ashen, the other broken. I foresaw the coming years of violence, the old grudges leapfrogging over generations, re-appearing in different forms.*

*I smiled down a last time and turned away to the east. Rur, I prayed in my head. Have a care. I felt his breath on my neck. I smelled his smell. The merest rim of the sun nudged up over the mountain.*

*The metal slid home, fast and free. I took my last breath and let it go, jumping into the next day. Silver light fizzed and shot apart. Love fell in particles, like snow.*

*Fergus screamed in the darkness, then woke up. He'd a pain in his shoulder blade.*

*'Mel?' he gasped. The curtains billowed, as if possessed. He doubled up, groaning.*

*'Owain,' he whispered.*

*The news he'd seen before coming to bed had revealed the names of the killed, with one Private Owain Jenkins amongst them. He saw the Land Rover coming up the hill, then down, the awful sound of the*